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Opinion Article

Bill 17: A Deeper Look Reveals Little That Is Fair Or Friendly For Albertans.

The Alberta Government wanted stronger and more unions in the province. Passing Bill 17: Alberta's Fair and Family Friendly Workplaces last week will certainly advance that agenda. To the winner has gone the spoils.

But our elected public servants disregarded the tenets of good governance and democracy by rushing the legislation through. Without any reasonably informed liberty to voice their views, Albertans' right to engage in public dialogue on this important issue was scuttled.

That's wrong.

It is poor governance when decision-makers view consulting people directly affected by legislative change as an avoidable inconvenience. Our province suffers when the public's attention is misdirected from issues fundamental to the public interest. Bill 17 is the result of these two irresponsible approaches by our elected representatives, and the consequence is that Albertans were done a disservice.

The economy and people's livelihoods are not matters to be dismissed. Neither is sacrificing the protection of dissenting views for the convenience of a prevailing predetermined view.

That's why Ontarians will benefit from good governance with having had more than two years of public consultations about the costs and benefits of changing the same legislation. From the Premier to the Minister of Labour, the Ontario Government has been meeting in good faith with people who will be directly affected by any changes. The draft legislation has now been posted online and citizens, community groups, employers and employees will have six months to comment on it.

Albertans were given 36 days of consultation. After introduction of Bill 17, it passed Third Reading 14 day's later. We have been told feedback from consultations and the final recommendations made by the province's expert advisor will not be made public. A client-solicitor relationship will protect government from having to release that information, the public's input, to the public.

Instead of informing Albertans about the full range of changes being considered, our elected leaders referenced movies from 1988 to seed a public perception that our laws were "outdated" and "antiquated". The absence of job-protected sick leaves was cited over and over again, excluding discussion of what the much broader changes to the Labour Relations Code would mean for Albertans.



Amendments to the Labour Relations Code reintroduced our pre-1988 system for governing how unions can be established in the workplace. This was the second piece of legislation amended by Bill 17 that was rarely mentioned in public. But misrepresenting these legislative changes as “modernization” didn’t matter: Albertans weren’t going to have the time or relevant information to raise any dissenting views.

It didn’t matter that Albertans consistently led the nation for more than a generation in employment levels, participation rates and wages, and now they don’t. There was never going to be any encouragement of robust public dialogue on how changing workplace laws were going to affect Alberta’s long-term prosperity.

Employers weren’t going to be given the opportunity to effectively voice any concerns that Bill 17 will create more layers of costs and barriers to job creation. Employees weren’t going to be afforded the courtesy of truly considering the reality of being a minority view in a workplace where the majority shares a different view, one that supports unions. Individuals’ ability to have a secret ballot vote on choosing union representation were protected before Bill 17. Now they’re not.

Sound fair? Likely not, and surely inconsistent with the entrepreneurial spirit that makes this province unique. The way Albertans have been treated by imposing this legislation bears no resemblance to a typical fair or friendly relationship. For healthy family relationships, when views differ, trust and respect are paramount.

To the business community, Bill 17 was more than a step backwards in developing policy that serves the public interest. The process took Albertans back to a future with less public trust and democratically, we are all the poorer for it.

Ken Kobly
President and CEO
Alberta Chambers of Commerce